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ABSTRACT

At Del Norte Independent School District (DNISD) (El Paso, Texas), Mexican American students are the majority ethnic group, but their history and culture have not been incorporated into the high school curriculum. Hence a goal of citizenship education, to increase student understanding of their own ethnic heritage and its part in U.S. history, is not being met. This paper proposes that Mexican American history be offered as a high school elective course, thereby exposing students to an alternative perspective in constructing the past and increasing Mexican American students' sense of ethnic identity. The first part of the paper briefly examines some academic challenges faced by Mexican Americans in the public school system generally and in DNISD. Latinos and Mexican Americans have low school achievement and graduation rates across the nation, in Texas, and in DNISD. The second section discusses ethnic literacy, ethnic identity, student self-esteem, and the role that teaching Mexican American history could serve in citizenship education. The third part examines deficiencies in the way that Mexican American history is currently taught in DNISD and the lack of good textbooks and instructional materials. The fourth section outlines strategies for teaching Mexican American history in two semesters through an inquiry-based method. (Contains 20 references.) (SV)

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Mexican American-History as an elective high school subject: Promoting ethnic literacy and citizenship among DNISD students

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Teaching Mexican-American History as an elective high school subject: Promoting ethnic literacy and citizenship among DNISD students

In Texas, the purpose of teaching social studies revolves around this principle. According to the Texas Social Studies Framework (1999), the general goal of social studies is to teach citizenship education. To effectively help students acquire the knowledge and skills for citizenship in a multicultural society, the social studies curriculum should view history through different and new perspectives allowing students to understand their past through culturally-based knowledge (Banks, 1997). In order to acquire culturally-based knowledge, schools should provide a curriculum that offers students the opportunity to learn about their own ethnic heritage (Escamilla, 1996).

At Del Norte Independent School District (DNISD)[1] located in El Paso, Texas, Mexican-Americans students are the majority ethnic group. However, their history or culture is not broadly incorporated into the curriculum at the high school level, specifically as part of U.S. history. Hence the goal of teaching citizenship education is not being fully met. I will propose in the following paper the integration of Mexican-American history as an elective at DNISD High Schools in order to help fulfill the main purpose of social studies; citizenship education. Because of its vast and complicated nature, it is difficult to effectively integrate Mexican-American history as a part of current American History and adequately study this lengthy subject in one school year. Hence, in order to fully grasp the importance of Mexican-American history it should be offered as an elective. By offering Mexican-American history as an elective, students are exposed to an alternative route in constructing the past and in-depth look into Mexican-American

[1] Del Norte Independent School District is used throughout the text as a pseudonym.

history and in doing so they stand to gain a strong sense of their ethnic identity, a critical stepping stone towards citizenship education (Banks, et al.).

The following study begins by briefly examining some academic challenges faced by Mexican-Americans in our public school system and those dealt with specifically by DNISD Mexican-American students. The second part focuses on teaching ethnic literacy, by incorporating Mexican-American history, in order to effectively accomplish the goal of teaching social studies. The third part concentrates on how to approach and teach Mexican-American history followed by a conclusion.

Mexican-Americans in schools today

Mexican-Americans as part of the overall Latino population are the largest undereducated minority group in the United States (Black, 1998). Across the nation, statistics show that Mexican-American students have low school achievement and graduation rates (Escamilla, 1996). Researchers argue there are a variety of reasons for the low academic achievement rates among Mexican-Americans. Researchers point to prejudice, lack of ethnic literacy and self-esteem and a poor school curriculum as some of the main causes for low academic performance(Armendariz, 2000., Banks, 1989., Black, et al.., Escamilla, et al., Salinas, 2000.).

In Texas public high schools, the same trend of national low academic achievement and graduation rates for Latinos presently persists and the DNISD is no exception. The Texas assessment of academic standards (TAAS) provides a glimpse into the relatively poor academic performance and graduation rates for Latinos at the state level as well as for DNISD.

In regard to low academic performance for Latinos, the TAAS state mandatory end of course exam of 2001, which tests eleventh and twelfth graders in four main subjects, Algebra I, Biology, English II and United States history, showed Latinos lagging behind Whites at the state

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level (Texas Education Agency). Only about 29 percent of Latinos passed the exam, compared to 56 percent for Whites in the state. For DNISD the numbers are very similar, the difference being however Latino students make up the majority student population, predominantly of Mexican origin, who took the test. Out of 3,425 Latino students who took the end of course exam, only 34 percent or 1,163 were able to pass, falling well behind White students numbering 929 out of which 59 percent or 551 passed.

For the U.S. history part of the end of course exam almost 72 percent of 2,450 Latino students passed at DNISD. This constitutes a relatively low number of Latinos passing considering that 91 percent of 676 White students passed the exam. At the state level, 63 percent Latino students passed falling 22 percentage points behind Whites with 85 percent.

Graduation rates are also relatively shocking. The percentage of Latino students graduating as part of the 2000 class was less than those for Whites and African-Americans. Roughly 73 percent of 2,867 Hispanics graduated compared to 85 percent of 731 for Whites and about 80 percent of 167 for African-Americans. Furthermore, the percentage of DNISD Hispanic high school graduates strongly correlates with the state percentage, with the state having a little over 72 percent.

Although many reasons can account for Latinos not passing the end of course exam and succeeding to graduate at both the state level and for DNISD, the above mentioned data demonstrates the public school system has not been able to serve the educational needs of Latino youth. Low academic achievement is most likely the end result of poor school curriculum, particularly in the field of social studies at DNISD. Though Mexican-Americans are the ethnic majority at DNISD, neither their history nor their contributions to American society are a strong part of the social studies curriculum, let alone the subject of U.S. History. As Moreno (1999)

aptly points out, that for the 150th year, the history of Mexican-Americans will not be taught to most high school students in the United States. How then can we fulfill the purpose of creating productive members of society based on the purpose of teaching social studies when the history of the student majority at DNISD is going untold?

Ethnic literacy; prelude to citizenship

Teaching Mexican history as part of the social studies curriculum will help Mexican-American high school students at DNISD gain an awareness of their heritage and become conscious of their ethnic identity. As Mexican-Americans teenagers become aware of their past and their culture, they acquire what Banks (et al.) coins as ethnic literacy, an essential academic quality in developing pride in who you are as well as learning to appreciate other cultures. Escamilla (et al.) argues that Mexican-Americans have not fully developed "ethnic literacy" because public schools have not adequately taught the cultural heritage and history of Mexican-Americans.

In the 1940s Paz (1961) identified the lack of 'ethnic literacy" in the *pachuco* of East Los Angeles:

> The pachuco has lost his whole inheritance: language, religion, customs, beliefs...His disguise is a protection, but is also differentiates and isolates him: it both hides him and points him out. (p. 15)

For Paz (et al.), the pachuco was the end result of a system that had distorted the identity of Mexican-American youth and produced a sense of inferiority. The pachuco sought in his form of dressing separatism and isolation from American society. The same can strongly be argued today about "gangsters", "cholos", "tag crews" and "party crews" in El Paso. In general,

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Mexican-American juveniles associated with delinquent activities and due to this behavior are categorized as "at-risk students". Their ethnic illiteracy and conceivably that of their parents, has perhaps lead many of them to isolate and alienate themselves from society seeking refuge in everything that is viewed out of the norm of mainstream society.

A very similar case of alienation is found among young African-Americans. West (1997) argues that African-Americans are still viewed as a "problem" by some segments of American society. And because of this perception, the burden of creating healthy race relations falls on Blacks. Because of this, Blacks are left trying to "fit in" to American society; yet this need of "fitting in" has led many young African-Americans to rebel and seek comfort in strong Black-nationalist sentiments (West, et al.).

The need to "fit in" among African-Americans is the same for Mexican-Americans living along the border, with a slight difference. When Mexican-Americans experienced racial prejudice and were left with the sense of trying to "fit in", they turned in the past to "lo mexicano" in seeking self-esteem and acceptance (Gutierrez, 1995). Hence, most likely Mexican-Americans turned to their culture and history in redefining their sense of American citizenship. In this respect, culture and history became a powerful tool to confront prejudice. However, the problem today is how does Mexican-American youth define "lo mexicano" and to what sources do they turn to in order to learn their culture and history?

Escamilla (et al.) concluded in her study of 10^{th}-grade students in a large urban district in Southern Arizona, that Mexican-American students did not have a broad knowledge of their culture, history or contributions of Mexican-Americans in the U.S.. In this order, the definition of "lo mexicano" for Mexican-American students is perhaps limited and heavily influenced by how American media portrays Mexico and Mexican-Americans to be. Suchlicki (et al.) noted

that American media portrays Mexican-Americans as illegal aliens who have come to the U.S. and taken jobs from hard-working Americans. This negative concept of Mexican-Americans in turn is viewed by some parts of society as a problem, just like African-Americans are viewed as a problem in the U.S. according to West (et al.).

If Mexican-American youth turn to "lo mexicano" in the face of prejudice, they must be properly informed of their history and contributions to American society in order to evade the feeling of inferiority and alienation from mainstream society. DNISD high schools have the civic obligation to fill the void of ethnic illiteracy by providing a formal education in Mexican-American history. As educators, we must assure the history of Mexican-Americans is taught to serve the purpose of citizen education. To realize productive and participatory lives for DNISD students, the pedagogy of social studies should prioritize the inclusion of their heritage in the curriculum. Greene (1993) notes that including the story of minorities, helps minorities develop a sense of purpose in life and to question that same purpose as a skill to fully participate in their communities. Mexican-American history should be told to the greatest extent possible, if not, we fail to meet the ethnic literacy needs of our students and to maintain the essence of teaching social studies.

Mexican-American history in the classroom

Some of my fellow teachers argue that Multicultural education is already an integral part of social studies instruction. They point out to sections in chapters focusing on the history of Mexican Americans in the U.S. History textbook adopted by DNISD. They believe that because of these sections, we as educators are fulfilling the ethnic literacy of our Mexican-American students. But these sections are sporadic throughout the textbook. The sections fail to analyze in depth the issues dealing with Mexican-Americans. For example, chapters sixteen and seventeen

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of American Voices (1992), the DNISD adopted U.S. History textbook, concentrates on the Civil Rights Movement and the decade of the 1960s. Suchlicki (et al.) points to this period of time in as important in bringing many changes to the Mexican-American community. However, the first chapter overlooks any contributions or achievements gained by Mexican-Americans during the Civil Rights struggle. There is no mention of how the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the Voting Acts of 1965 helped Mexican-Americans improve their legal status throughout the Southwest. In chapter seventeen of American Voices, out of almost twenty five pages that compose this chapter, only about a page is dedicated to Hispanic-Americans, and not necessarily Mexican-Americans. In fact, roughly two paragraphs focus on Mexican-American current history during the sixties. Of these two paragraphs, the topic sentence of one claims that "Hispanics produced no civil rights movement equivalent to African-Americans, women or Native Americans." (American Voices, p.714). Indeed, one could argue that this last sentence not only overlooks the achievements gained by Mexican-Americans during these turbulent times, but also portrays Mexican-American history as insignificant and to a certain degree inferior.

Besides the lack of academic material on Mexican-American history as part of the American history curriculum, Epstein (1997) argues that students view U.S. history differently depending on their culture or ethnicity. Epstein (et al.) points out how European American students considered progressive development events of the U.S. to be the most important issues affecting the nation. In comparison, African-American students viewed freedom and equality issues to be the most significant in American contemporary history.

In my experience as a middle and high school social studies teacher, many Mexican-American students as did African-Americans in Epstein's (et al.) study, viewed equality issues to be noteworthy in learning U.S. History. However, they complained of the lack of material on

Mexican-American history and few knew the history of Mexican-Americans. In one class activity, I asked several high school students to define their ethnicity. They all responded by saying they were Mexicans and yet when I asked if any of them could tell me what happened in 1910 in Mexico there was no response. Their ignorance towards the Mexican Revolution of 1910 illustrates the limited knowledge of their own history and their ethnic illiteracy.

There is no doubt that the Mexican Revolution of 1910 was a pivotal event in stimulating the immigration of many Mexican-Americans. Gutierrez (et al.) attributes this event as the number one cause of Mexican immigration to the U.S., which rivaled the large number of European immigration at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the Mexican Revolution was an important cause in the increase of the Mexican-American population along the border as well as influencing the complex social patterns of Mexican-American and Anglo relationships (Gutierrez, et al.). Moreover, the Mexican Revolution was the first social revolution in America and set the stage for other major social revolutions throughout the modern world like the Cuban Revolution of 1958.

Overall, teaching Mexican-American History can aid in ending the alienation and isolation of Mexican-American youth by filling their void of ethnic illiteracy. Through a dialogical approach based on an inclusive framework of race relations and the recognition and teaching of Mexican-American History as part of the social studies curriculum at DNISD, students are offered a different view of their ethnic identity. Based on Escamilla's (et al.) research, developing positive ethnic identity influences the way a person perceives him or herself at school. In addition, life choices, perceptions and approaches to learning are strongly influenced by a person's view of his or her ethnic identity. Consequently, developing positive ethnic identity through ethnic literacy students can become caring citizens (Banks, 1997).

Citizenship education, as noted before, is the purpose of teaching social studies. Hence, by teaching Mexican-American history thoroughly and extensively as an elective, we are leading Mexican-American students to productive and participatory lives as caring citizens.

Approaching Mexican-American history

Mexican-American history should be taught through an inquiry-based method in two school semesters. The first semester should introduce the student to the history of Mexico followed by the history of Mexican-Americans in the second semester. Mexico's history should be covered initially to provide a critical framework in order for the student to realize the historical development of the Mexican nation and the complex interrelationship it has had with the U.S.. Leading the student through the history of Mexico, a study of Mexican-American history should follow, because the latter is the result of the clash of two nations. Because historical events are usually taught through a chronological order, it makes sense to teach Mexico's history first followed by Mexican-American history.

Because of its vast and unique history, Mexico's past should encompass the wide range of its political and economic history as well as its society and culture. Although more discussion should take place in selecting what Mexican history should be taught as part of the social studies curriculum, a tentative outline is offered from a recompilation of Mexican History texts (Meyer, 1987, Teja, 1969, Byrd, 1967) to be offered during the first semester:

1. The Spanish Conquest: From the fall of the Aztec empire to the colonial period.
2. Independent Mexico: From the last days of the Viceroy period of the Bourbons to the Wars of Independence.
3. Mexico's national integration: From Iturbide's Empire to the restoration of the Mexican Republic.

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4. The Modernization of Mexico: From the rise to the fall of Dictator Don Porfirio Diaz.

5. The Mexican Revolution: From the rise of Francisco Madero to the Mexico under Plutarco Calles.

6. Modern day Mexico: From Cardenas to present day.

Each number outlining the historical period should be completed in two weeks. Hence, the historical data should be concise and easy to follow.

During the second semester, the history of Mexican-Americans should be the central focus. The selection of historical data covering this period should be further debated. However, the following is a tentative outline offered by Escamilla (et al.):

1. Mexican-American Period (1848-1960)

2. Contemporary Period – The Civil Rights Era (1960-present)

In addition, Escamilla (et al.) offers a range of textbooks and other teaching materials that should accompany the study of Mexican-American history.

Although many models of learning social studies have guaranteed to promote student success, the inquiry-based approach seems apt in allowing students to critically approach Mexican-American history. This model constantly frames and analyzes critical and controversial questions about U.S. and the modern world, and employs these questions to understanding the past (Singer, 1999).

In my experience inside the classroom, Mexican-American students favored activities in where discussion of a current issue was related to the past of the U.S.. Furthermore, students seemed more engaged in learning when the issue at hand was something they could relate to culturally. For example, when studying the Great Depression during class, Mexican-American students where apparently more interested and actively participated more when the topic of

Mexican-American forced repatriation was covered. Students began asking questions of why and how about forced repatriation. The textbook did not cover it in depth, so I explained this event to the best of my knowledge. The discussion was immediately followed with a current issue, in this case illegal immigration, especially from Mexico. The above not only illustrates the inquiry-method at work, but also the idea brought by Epstein (et al.), students learn differently depending on their ethnic affiliation.

Conclusion

Everyone stands to gain in learning the history of Mexican-Americans. In regard to teaching Mexico's History, the geographical proximity, the interdependence of both the Mexican and American economy, the interrelation of the culture and people in the southwest, the shared border and the current day interests shaping and linking both countries futures are key in developing a sense of place and purpose for any high school student regardless of his or her ethnicity or background at DNISD.

Integrating Mexican-American history is in accordance with our purpose of teaching social studies; the realization of productive and participatory caring citizens. A curriculum that includes the heritage of the majority ethnic group at DNISD provides a positive and critical mean to develop that majority's ethnic literacy. But this curriculum must be extensive in order to provide an analytical and in-depth approach to the history of Mexican-Americans, hence creating the subject as an elective. An in-depth approach to Mexican-American past will more than likely develop a strong sense of ethnic literacy. Through the understanding of their history and cultural contributions to the U.S., Mexican-American youth are set on the path towards citizenship education.

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Abstract

Offering Mexican-American history as an elective at high schools at Del Norte Independent School District should help promote ethnic literacy and citizenship education. The majority student population in this United States-Mexico border school district is Mexican-American, however the social studies curriculum lacks to fully integrate the history of Mexico and Mexican-Americans. Integrating Mexican-American history should help educate high school students to become law-abiding, participatory and productive citizens in our pluralistic democratic society. A study of Mexican-American school achievement and graduation rates at Del Norte Independent School District revealed low performance relative to White students, the second largest ethnic group. The data study indicates a need for school reform, particularly in the social studies curriculum. Historical topics are offered to establish a study framework to approach the history of Mexico and Mexican-Americans.

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